

A Night on the Flight Line, Part II

The dayshift crew chief, Sgt. Kraut, tossed the radio at me like he was getting rid of highly radioactive material. I soon found out why about fifteen seconds later.

<<6013, MACC>>

Both of us looked at the radio like it was belching out some indecipherable tongue.

<<6013, MACC>>

Kraut cocked his eyebrow. "You gonna get that?"

The look in his eyes seemed to scream, "Please, for the love of god, answer it!"

I nodded and keyed the mic. "MACC, One-Three. Go ahead."

<< Roger, One-Three. What's the status of Job Number 1427? >>

I looked questioningly to Kraut. "That's the T/R leak. It's good to go. It's allowed to leak statically."

I nodded and answered the Maintenance Control Center. "Roger, MACC. Close that one out, within limits."

<< Copy, One-Three. What about Job Numbers 1428 to 1453? >>

I threw my arms up in the air in exasperation and asked Kraut, "What the hell is that shit?"

"It's a long story."

I keyed the mic and shot the skunk eye at Kraut. "Standby MACC, I'll get back with ya on those after turnover."

Thirty minutes later, we finished shift turnover. The aircraft forms were a mess, there were specialists and ARTs (civilian Air Reserve Technicians) running all over the place, and I was the man with the radio. It's not good to be The Man with the Radio. Everyone and their brother call you every 30 seconds asking the same damned questions over and over again, preventing you from getting any meaningful work done. Luckily, two more swing-shifters showed up and I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw they outranked me. The most senior guy on the plane was supposed to take the radio, so I anticipated relinquishing it at the soonest opportunity.

Staff Sergeants McCool and Hutch sat down. Well, "sat" is too generic a term. McCool kinda slid into the seat opposite me and Hutch collapsed into the seat across the aisle from me like a pile of laundry. He looked like he was wearing the same uniform from the previous night. In fact, I'm certain that it was, since it looked like he had slept in it. I don't think he had actually changed clothes after work. His face was pale, he had dark circles under his eyes, and his mouth was just short of fully closed. Diagnosis: Brown Water Flu.

McCool calmly looked at the forms, going slowly from page to page and nodding his head from time to time. I started slowly, almost imperceptibly, sliding the radio across the table towards him. I had almost got it to the point where it was nearer him than to me when he stopped mid page-turn and looked at the radio, then to me. He did this a couple of times before resuming his page turning. "You've got the radio tonight."

Shit.

McCool, finished with the forms, addressed Hutch and me. "Alright, this is what we're going to do." He stated what the priority write-ups were and ran through the sequence of events for the night. He gave Hutch and me our respective lists of write-ups to work and told us to get at it. He would stay at the table coordinating everything, without the radio. In other words, I would coordinate everything on the move while he fucked-off upstairs.

Hutch and I got up to head downstairs. Well, I got up at least. Hutch slowly leaned forward and let gravity do the rest until he hit the wall opposite him and assumed a stance that, if you cocked your head and squinted your eyes, could be mistaken for a standing human being. I headed down the passageway towards the Flight Deck ladder.

"Yo,P!" McCool yelled after me. I turned around. "Don't forget the radio."

"But if you know everything that's going on, wouldn't it make sense for you to keep it?" It seemed like a sensible enough question, it being his job and all.

"Hell no, I ain't talking on that damned thing. If they call, ask me and I'll tell you what to say."

I slowly exhaled, knowing the whole thing was futile anyway. "Alright."

Three hours later, after running up and down a twenty foot B-2 stand a few dozen times to ask McCool what the hell was going on so I could answer MACC and the Production Supervisor's questions, the only thing I had accomplished was stripping out numerous screws on a panel.

I looked at my watch. It was 1800 and our lunches still had not arrived yet. During this particular time in history, the Air Force was coming out of the RIF (Reduction in Force) and still deploying people to various areas of the world in support of myriad operations. Manning was a little low at work because of that and other things, so instead of getting a chow break, we ordered "Box Nasties" at the beginning of the shift. The truck driver would then go and pick them up around 1730 and start delivering them to the aircraft. We'd inhale the meager meals out at the plane and then get back to work as soon as possible. Now, Box Nasties in those days weren't all that great. They contained one each ham and cheese sandwich, one each fruit, and one each drink. If you were lucky, you got one with a foreign Coke with some indecipherable script that was surplus from the Gulf War. All I ever got were drink cartons full of Apple Juice that tasted like pears and whose only exotic feature was that the phrase "Artificial Colour" had the Queen's

spelling. Still, it filled the spot and was sorely needed on rough nights.

Tonight was shaping up to be a rough night, but it was starting to get on with no sign of the Box Lunches' imminent arrival. I made one last scan of the flight line for our errant truck and finding no sign of it, resigned myself to going back on the airplane. I walked up the crew entry door ladder and jumped into the cargo compartment of the aircraft. As I was walking around the forward ramp area, I heard a loud *THUNK!* and looked to the back of the airplane to see the Red Headed Stepchild himself at the Aft Ramp/Door Control panel. Somehow, during all the fuss and confusion of the preceding three hours, this screw-up had skillfully inserted himself into my aircraft. I was wondering just what in the hell this bastard was doing on my plane, so I started walking back there to find out.

Now, the aft cargo door/ramp system on the C-5 is a complex kluge. Its main feature is a floating pressure door that, depending on what type of cargo is being loaded, also doubles as a ramp extension. It is not permanently attached to the aircraft. SrA Chamberpot was attempting to open the door in "Truckbed" mode for palletized cargo, but I had noticed that he had not hit the two most important valves needed to correctly perform this procedure.

Let me try to break it down here for you. There was a bit of an unorthodox procedure when it came to opening the doors in "Truckbed" mode. Halfway through the procedure, you must manually depress two hydraulic valves, labeled "C" and "I" that would position two actuators which would lock a couple of latches on to the pressure door and actuate it upwards against the top of the cargo compartment when the appropriate switch was hit.

As I was observing Chamberpot going through the motions of opening the rear doors, I noticed that he had failed to perform this critical step and was about to potentially drop a 3+ ton metal slab onto the cargo floor.* Noticing his hand was on the switch to start the final process of opening up the ramp, I began running and frantically waving my arms around in the air, yelling "C & I! C & I!" over and over again at the top of my lungs. Since both APUs (Auxiliary Power Units) were running and the hydraulic systems were on, it was impossible for him to hear me. He apparently saw me gesticulating like a wild man and turned to face me, his hand still on the switch. He stared at me with that typical blank stare of his and shook his head. He looked puzzled, but then again, that was his usual appearance. He shrugged his shoulders and turned around to face the back doors.

I was running for all I was worth. The length of the C-5 is about as long as a football field (at least it seemed that way), and I was at about the opponent's 30-yard line. Desperate, I lifted my arm and hurled the radio at him in mid step. It tumbled end over end and clocked the stupid son of a bitch right on the side of the noggin. I didn't mean to hit him in the head; it was just a lucky shot. He crumpled in on himself. I had knocked the dumb bastard out cold. I ran up to him, saw he was still breathing, looked up, and quickly returned the ramp/door system back to its normal, safe state. I looked down at Chamberpot and briefly considered ending his pathetic existence right then and there, but decided life in Leavenworth wasn't worth it.

Chamberpot came-to and slowly got up. "What happened, man?" he asked in the most dumbass accent I had ever heard. The guy sounded like a mix between Bubba from "*Forrest Gump*" and Bullwinkle the Moose.

"You were about to drop the damned pressure door on your head, dumbass." I replied.

Chamberpot looked up the massive pressure door. "Thanks, man. Guess I shoulda used the checklist, huh?" He started laughing.

"Huhuhuhuhuh," I laughed back at him mockingly. He stopped laughing and looked down. There on the cargo floor was the radio, its antenna broken and the battery pack cracked at the point of impact on Chamberpot's thick, Neanderthal-like skull. I keyed it a couple of times, but it was dead.

"Huh huh huh. You're in trooooooubuuuuuuule!"

I immediately regretted sparing his life.

*In actuality, depressing the C & I valves is merely a precautionary procedure to open the aft doors in Truckbed mode. You could safely actuate the aft doors without depressing them, but there exists the slight possibility that the locks may not engage the pressure door, so it's better to be safe than sorry. Of course, they never explained that to us. They preferred to scare us into performing the procedure instead of skipping it in the checklist.

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